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ABSTRACT

By making virtue of ascesis or self-discipline in their sport, the athlete evangelists (the "athletae-Dei"), unwittingly rob sport of its fundamental theological significance. These proponents of an evangelical brand of protestant theology have shifted drastically from an anti-sport stance of a century ago to a position that not only embraces sport but seeks to harness it for evangelistic purposes. The "athletae-Dei" use the popularity gained through athletics to propogate a theology. They have integrated their theology with their sport, thus resulting in unique motives for competing, for winning, and for training. In spite of the fact that the "athletae-Dei" place a premium on all-out effort, they overtly deemphasize winning. Training the athlete in the "athletae-Dei" manner requires an ascesis that is ordered to bring about victory on the athletic field; yet within the context of his/her spiritual calling. Athletic training is also a discipline imposed by the will of God for spiritual ends. Emerging almost contemporaneously with the sport evangelism movement has been a fascination by certain theologians in a play theology. It is an attempt to illuminate the meaning of play through an application of theology. In their earnestness, the "athletae-Dei" fail to see sport as a revelation of the joyous nature of an existence secure in God and at the same time, a demonstration of the sediment of insufficiency and the transitory quality of life that comes with a realization of the true boundaries of an earthly existence. (Author/SK)

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THE ATHLETAE DEI: MISSING THE MEANING OF SPORT

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THE ATHLETAE DEI: MISSING THE MEANING OF SPORT

In his letter to the Christian church at Corinth in 56AD the Apostle Paul underscored a long and curious relationship between the athletic and the religious by showing points of contact and points of departure between the athletic contests of the Isthmian Games and the spiritual contests faced by his readers in their everyday lives. In the Epistle to the Corinthians he painted a picture of a spiritual athlete:

> "Know ye not that they who run in a race run all, but one receiveth the prize? Even so run, that ye may attain. And every man that striveth in the game is temperate in all things. Now they do it to receive a corruptible crown; but we an incorruptible." (])

It was good pedagogical and exhortative strategy. It was a theology-in-sport metaphor that placed abstract theological concepts within a familiar athletic context. But little did St. Paul realize that he had seized on a root metaphor that would surface in this century in a literal form- a vivid personification of the spiritual athlete.....the athletae Dei.....the athletes of God. The athletae Dei are the literal transformations of St. Paul's metaphor for whom sport is more than a tidy allegorical representation of spiritual struggles. For them sport is a unique mode of theological expression that transcends the personal and the materialistic. Sport is an instrument to be appropriated for defining and sharing one's theological views and for directing the attention of others to spiritual considerations.

Athletae Dei may be found in the more than 55,000 members of the Fellowship of Christian Athletes, "A movement to confront athletes and coaches- and through them the youth of the nation- with the challenge and adventure of following Christ..." (2). They also are numbered among the Athletes in Action (AIA), a sports outreach of the Campus Crusade for Christ organization whose nine teams compete with athletic teams from major universities in contests which are structured to provide intermissions during which members of the AIA give personal accounts of their faith and solicit spectators to "make a decision for Christ". The extensiveness of this organization is appreciated when one considers that AIA teams have competed in front of nearly three million spectators. Athletae Dei are also represented by those "free lancers" who, apart from any strong organizational affiliation, literalize St. Paul's metaphor by merging religious and athletic experiences.

This paper is a preliminary analysis of the purpose and nature of sport as viewed by the athletae Dei. The analysis is based on the author's conversations with the athletes, and on their recorded statements. It is not intended to be a full account of either the theological system of these athletes or their philosophy of sport; nor does it fully probe the depth of the ramifications of their theology for sport. Neither is it contended that the analysis necessarily fits all those who may legitimately be numbered among the athletae Dei. Variations in philosophical and theological perspective exist among the members of the smallest communities; thus a single, unified philosophy of sport may not exist among these athletes.

The author's research, however, has led him to believe that the observations whichfollow are fairly representative of the position of the athletae Dei.

Theology of the Athletae Dei

Although there is a considerable range of denominational representation among the athletae Dei, the theological stance fits squarely within the boundaries of orthodox, Protestant, evangelical Christianity. This , of course, is not to suggest that all of these athletes have formulated a deep or even coherent theology. Some are quite clearly theological lightweights whose interest and enthusiasm for methodology far exceed their insight into the complexities of the Christian faith and Biblical interpretation. A theological common denominator is found in an affirmation of three principles:

> 1. A belief in the complete reliability and final authority of Scripture, both Old and New Testaments, as the only infallible, divinely inspired rule of faith and practice. (In the parlance of some of the athletae Dei, the Scripture is God's rule book for life "...in which God presents his game plan in a very clear and expressive way." (3) Belief in the authority of the Scriptures is a fundamental precept and is the basis for accepting the second and third principles.
>
> 2. The necessity of a personal, experiential faith in Jesus Christ, being himself the only God-man who, by his death atoned for the sin of humanity, and through his historical resurrection made possible the restoration of an individual, personal relationship with God. In personally committing one's life to Christ, one is said to have become "spiritually reborn" and enters into a growing relationship with God. Without such a spiritual

> rebirth, man is doomed not only to an eternity separated from a Holy God, but faced with a life to be lived on earth that is considerably short of the potential which God has intended.
>
> 3. Finally, there follows the necessity of actively obeying Christ's great commission to his disciples to spread the gospel message embodied in the second principle.

Given the full ramifications of the message for those who do not make this personal commitment to Christ, witnessing becomes an urgent matter requiring positive and decisive action. Such a sense of urgency is apparent in former New York Yankee Bobby Richardson's comment that:

> "If someone had cancer and I had the cure I would not just stand around and wait for the person to ask me for it. I would share the cure with him. In the same way committed Christians are eager to share the love of Jesus Christ." (4)

In responding to this third principle by issuing public testimonies of his faith or by engaging in personal or group evangelistic efforts, the athlete makes himself known as an athlete of God.

A superficial consideration might leave some convinced that there really is no uniqueness in the sport of the athletae Dei; that they simply use the popularity gained through athletics to propogate a theology, much like the Cambridge Seven of England, star cricketers turned evangelical missionaries during the Victorian period. (5). While there undoubtedly is much of this in the movement, the following brief analysis will attempt to show that the athletae Dei have integrated their theology (albeit imperfectly) with their sport, resulting in unique motives for competing, for winning and for training. The analysis concludes with a discussion of the imperfections of the integration when viewed in light of a theology of play.

Purpose of Athletic Competition

"The chief end of man", reads the Westminster Catechism, "is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever." For the Christian, it is essential that all activities, particularly those that consume large amounts of time and energy, be evaluated in light of this criterion. Much of the objection of the Puritans to sport, of course, was that sport lacked a convincing face-theological validity which rendered it inappropriate as an activity for glorifying God. Although there has been some recent (benign) criticism in the evangelical camp about the excessive amounts of time devoted to the consumption of sport (6), the athletae Dei have turned such arguments around by claiming that, far from being questionable diversions of time and energy, their athletic efforts constitute acts that glorify God. For example, a wrestler observes that: "...wrestling can be a worship of God if I wrestle the best that I can..." (7) and Pittsburgh Pirate Manny Sanguillen claims that he just wants "to glorify God-that's why I play ball." (8). In fact, the athletae Dei move beyond mere legitimation of excessive involvement in sport- they confess recognition of a spiritual responsibility to dedicate and display their God-given talents as an act of glorification. This is clear in the testimony of Norm Evans, Miami Dolphin football player:

> "So I've determined in my life to be available to God, and not to live under my own power in my own determination but in the power of the Holy Spirit to be what God wants me to be. I have discovered that I'm a better athlete because of Jesus Christ in my life. I now realize that my labors

> should be as it says in Colossians 3:17 and 3:23 and 24- that it's the Lord I'm working for. All the ability that I have is given to me by Him, and so I should determine to do what I can for Him".(9)

The conception of acts of glorification here differ from the ancient practice of collectively dedicating a contest as a tribute to a deity. Even in those rare instances in which all of the contestants are united in theological perspective (evangelical), the contests fall considerably short of anything resembling an evangelical emulation of the religious ritual associated with the Greek games. In fact, there is little external evidence apparent during the contest to suggest that the competitive drive of the athletae Dei is heavenly directed. Acts of glorification here are personal attempts to magnify and extol the Almighty through individual human effort. Glorification here is an individual attempt to reconcile the Christian call to life in the world (the here and now) and to a life in Christ (the totally other) through a conscientious development and application of athletic talents which take on the character of reverential gestures.

Generally, the athletae Dei measure acts of glorification on a productivity rather than an ethical scale. God is glorified only to the extent that the athlete has given fully and completely of himself, an act frequently termed "total release":

> "God doesn't want me to be a 70% weightlifter. He wants me to release all that I have in trying to be the best lifter I can possibly be. That glorifies Him...Winning in weightlifting, or any other sport, is not so much a question of beating your opponent, but of being the best athlete you can be for God's glory." (10)

Not only does anything less than an all-out effort fail to bring glory to God, but some consider it a violation of God's law, as is reflected in PGA touring pro Bob Unger's statement that: "If I give my best I'm satisfied. If I don't, I confess it to God as sin and rebound." (11)

Motives for Winning

In spite of the fact that the athletae Dei place a premium on all out effort, they overtly deemphasize winning. Personal honor pride, ego, and self-acclaim are neither convincing nor legitimate motives for the athlete who is directed toward "seeking first the kingdom of God" and who no longer competes for himself but for God. (A wrestler is described in an AIA newsletter as one who, since becoming a Christian, is no longer "in bondage to the scoreboard".) Yet a philosophy that closes the door on self and personal gain as motives for winning, can easily pry open other doors to admit a number of alternative motives. As Huizinga has so cleverly revealed: "...something more than honor is associated with winning... Every game has its stake. It can be of material or symbolic value but also ideal." (12)

There is first of all, a pragmatic (almost materialistic) motive for winning that is the obvious cornerstone of the sports-evangelism movement. Winning brings popularity and popularity offers new opportunity for evangelism. This is clearly evident in the comments of Jim King, an NBA player who left the Chicago Bulls

to coach an AIA basketball team, on the eve of his team's game with UCLA:

> If we beat UCLA tomorrow night, how many writers are going to know about our team? There is going to be national interest. We can talk to a lot more people by being successful." (13)

Secondly, the athletae Dei capitalize on the symbolic value of demonstrated success and a ready potential for achievement. The powerful influence of "winners" in conveying messages and soliciting responses from others, whether or not there is a logical causal relationship between the content of the message and the success attained by the winner, is a well established social phenomenon. Winning in athletics then, becomes important because it lends a degree of credibility to the athlete's message. In Jim King's words:

> "We have to be successful. We have to win. That's what the world looks at. The world won't listen to our message if we aren't winners." (14)

Thus, while few would attribute their success in athletic endeavors to a direct intervention by God on the playing field, the implied causal relationship between theological persuasion and demonstrated success which is presented cannot be denied. Winning therefore, takes on a fundamental significance, not important in itself, not important to the personal honor of the athlete, but as a critical determinant of the impact of the message of the sport evangelist. Winning becomes a prerequisite for his mission.

Winning athletic contests also takes on significance because of the heavy symbolic value attached to winning in the theological

realm (WINNING). Theologically, WINNING is the ideal symbolized by a disciple who has shaped his life around the perfect life of Christ. It is a metaphor that hinges on a perception of winning in the world as something that is intrinsically valuable. Often the symbolism is energized to the point that the line between winning and WINNING fades and it becomes impossible to distinguish between them. This can be seen in former Green Bay Packer Carroll Dale's comments on winning:

> "I think the Bible tells us that our purpose in life is winning, that our purpose as Christians is to go out into the ends of the earth spreading the Good News of the birth, death and Resurrection of Christ, and that we should be winners for Christ." (15)

The same symbolism crops up in the speech of former Cleveland Brown-turned-evangelist Bill Glass as he answers Jack Scott's charges that winning is overemphasized in athletics:

> "...it would be a mistake to take the winning element out of it. Jesus doesn't encourage us to be losers. He wants to take losers and make them winners." (16)

Where the distinction between the two kinds of winning is blurred, the metaphor is easily turned on its end, a trick that amplifies the significance of winning games in the real world by imparting a theological motive.

Finally, while there is not a direct attempt to attribute theological significance to the outcome of the contest, the athlete's portrayal of himself as one who "is competing for God" leads to strong implications in this direction. There is a tendency for

the athletae Dei to view themselves as athletes who in some way "represent" God- much in the same way that the Steelers "represent" Pittsburgh. Having identified his efforts with God, the athlete becomes the one to stand in the gap- responsible for magnification of the name of the Lord in victory or devaluing His name in defeat. God is implicitly portrayed as a third party with a vested interest in the outcome of the contest, and although it becomes a bit awkward theologically to put God on the sidelines to endure the surprises of the contest along with the spectators and to share in the fan's sense of emotional dependency on the competing athletes, this becomes inevitable in such a representational framework. A glimpse of the real importance attached to the outcome of a contest in such a representational scheme can be seen in the rather consistent tendency for athletes to give God credit for victory and to suggest that such victories bring glory to His name. A typical illustration is Norm Evans explanation that:

> "...I've determined, now that I'm a Christian; to give God the glory, or to try to give God the glory, for every success I have. Truly my successes are gifts from Him, because He has given me the ability and opportunity to play." (17)

Defeats on the other hand, are given various interpretations (it was God-ordered, I didn't give my best; God was teaching me a lesson) but seldom are they pointed to as events which served to glorify God.

Training and Discipline

It is in their preparation and training for athletic contests that the athletae Dei most potently epitomize the spiritual athlete sketched by St. Paul. Training requires an ascesis that is ordered to bring about victory on the athletic field; yet within the context of his spiritual calling, athletic training is also a discipline imposed by the will of God for spiritual ends. It combines an ascesis that flows from what Ziesler has termed the "disciplinary motive" (18) with the practical ascesis associated with athletic training (19). It is a call to a life of rigor, arduous trial and self denial, requiring a spirit of obedience to a call of God, a hint of which is visible in Bill Glass's words:

> "I believe that God has led me to play pro football. There are many times when it would be easier not to play. I lift weights, do isometric exercises, play handball, and run 40 yard dashes almost daily throughout the off season in order to be in shape to play. It's no picnic on the field at times either. But I believe that if I were to quit playing pro football now I would be deserting the calling of God." (20)

As is the case with winning, a symbolic value- a spiritual significance- is attached to training and discipline which leads to a fascination with the ascesis of the athletic experience. The line drawn between the discipline required for athletics and the discipline necessary for spiritual perfection is sufficiently permeable to allow the rhetoric to flow easily across, mixing the mundane with the sacred, so that the actual and the spiritual become one and the same. One of many examples of this is football coach Paul Dietzel's

characterization of Jesus as a person "...whose body was muscled by honest toil and rigorous discipline". Dietzel follows this by urging his readers to live "harnessed, well-trained disciplined lives for Christ." (21)

Theology of Play

Emerging almost contemporanecusly with the sports-evangelism movement has been a fascination by certain theologians in a play theology or a theology of play. It is an attempt to illuminate the meaning of play through an application of theology, and/or the attempt to clarify theology by applying a play metaphor. Although there is a considerable range of perspective among the play theologians (from the radical postures of Cox (22), Meale (23) and Miller (24) to the more moderate theologies of Moltmann (25) and Rahner (26)) all see play and theology as functional components of a divine servomechanism in which one's play is given direction and meaning by his theology, which in turn is informed by the play metaphor. Play gives context to theology on the one hand and this play-theology gives meaning to play in return. Play theology provides an unusually apposite frame of reference for analyzing the sport of the athletae Dei. In the brief analysis that follows, only selected elements from the more moderate models of Rahner and Moltmann which have some theological consistency with the theology of the athletae Dei have been used in order to sidestep development of either an apologetic or theological critique.

Play theology is rooted in a view of creation as a result of divine play, a way of expressing the metaphysical truth that the creation of the world was a meaningful, serious, spontaneous, joyful and free act, but was also entirely unnecessary as far as God was concerned." The play of God" becomes a way of relating the fact that "...both creation and the incarnation are expressions of God's love, and that this love, though full of purpose and meaning, is a love that works in creative freedom, wholly ungoverned by necessity or restraint..." (27). Man therefore attains the highest form of human development by demonstrating those qualities which we normally associate with play and by becoming a "plaything of God". And it is in his play that man achieves the "...intuitive imitation and still earth-bound recovery of an original unity he once had with the One and the Good." (28) Play, therefore, can be both actual as well as a disposition of the soul.

Within this context, Moltmann sees man's purpose as giving glory to the true God and rejoicing in God's and his own existence. But unlike the athletae Dei, Moltmann does not see man capable of bringing authentic glory to God in purposeful acts which are designed to justify his own existence; but rather in the acceptance of his existence as having been justified before he was able to do or fail to do anything. Man does not glorify God in the carrying out of productive acts. Instead, it is in true, groundless, goal-less, purposeless play in which man can"fully lay hold of the joy which

embraces the Creator and his own existence." (29) It is only through play then, that man can intuitively see through that dreadful question of existence: "For what"?

When viewed from Moltmann's side, the attempts by the athletae Dei to bring glory to God through acts of individual productivity are futile. God is neither a spectator or a coach standing on the sidelines taking notes of valiant efforts of the players. The exaggerated emphasis on productivity detracts from the ultimate theological purpose of the athletic experience- which, according to Moltmann, should be to stimulate profound rejoicing in one's existence... secure in God. It is their achievement-ends orientation that obscures from the athletae Dei's view the possibility of the game as a celebration; a different kind of religious experience, void of the tension that is so inevitable when the stakes are so high. The calling of the athlete of God is not to a life of bondage, struggle and toil, but to a demonstration of his new being in God by doing "free works"- works which are freed from the purpose of self justification. Works which, like grace, occur for nothing- that is for the sake of pleasing God.

Thus, it is from "the game of grace", a theological doctrine which is thoroughly embedded in the evangelical tradition, that the athletae Dei should take their cue for interpreting the sport world. It is a game of Qui perd gagne- the loser wins- the game in which:

> "...the loser wins and the lost are saved, the poor are filled and the rich are left empty handed; the game of eschatalogical surprises in which the first shall be last and the last first." (30)

When the principle of grace becomes the integrative ideal for sport and theology, the symbolism (and thus the importance) associated with winning appears out of place, and the spiritual-athletic ascesis seems pointless.

For Hugo Rahner, play also has divine significance. It is viewed as a human activity that approximates to the Creator (31); a n anticipation of heavenly joy; a kind of rehearsal, fashioned into gesture, sound or word of that Godward directed harmony of body and soul we call heaven.(32) Yet Rahner observes that true play for the Christian is possible only when he has solved the dialectical tension that arises from being in the world and yet not being part of the world. The true player is pictured as one who is poised between gaiety and gravity, who laughs through his tears- a grave-merry man who is absorbed into the world and yet can see beyond it to its ultimate worthlessness. Only the eutrapelos, the "well-turning person", the one who strikes the happy mean between unmitigated seriousness and buffoonery can solve the dialectical tension and truly play as he "...kicks the world away from him with the airy grace of a dancer, and yet, at the same time, presses it to his heart." (33)

The athletae Dei, no less than their contemporary "secular" counterparts who compete for the corruptible crowns, take their sport seriously and in earnest. Indeed, the game has been moved to a

higher plane; the stakes have changed. Isn't earnestness required? Yet where in all of the seriousness is the trace of the gracefulness, light heartedness, gaiety and freedom of spirit that "intuitively imitates the play of the Creator?" For all of the theology he has infused into his sport, it seems that the athlete of God has come short of catching hold of the real theological essence of his athletic experience. By setting high theological stakes for their sport, stakes that attach to ascesis, individual achievement and technical quality of human effort, the athletae Dei pass beyond the happy mean required for divine play and become trapped on what Rahner has called "the hopelessly wrong road of idiotic earnestness":

> "Any man who can truly see the transcendental relation of all created things to God will avoid applying to the consideration of even the most serious things a seriousness that distorts them. He knows-and wisely recognizes the fact with a wry smile-that even the greatest deeds of men are but children's games compared with the perfection which our souls desire or the perfection that is God himself." (34)

In their transcendental earnestness, in trying to take the game to a higher plane, have the athletae Dei precluded their own participation in that mysterious human-divine game? Can the athletae Dei truly play under the prescribed limitations of a divine call...or might it be that they have simply failed to see that all are called to play?

Of all of those who enter the arena should not the athlete of God be the one to view sport as a celebration of the grave-merry man, a revelation of the joyous nature of a Christian's existence secure in God, and at the same time appreciate sport for its demonstration

of the sediment of insufficiency and the transitory quality of life that comes with a realization of the true boundaries of an earthly existence? For what is more joyous than to be lost in the world of sport and yet what is more temporal, more transitory than the ad interim pronouncement of the winner of the game.

Only when they search out and discover these more eternal implications of their theology for their sport will the athletae Dei come to appreciate the true and full meaning of sport.

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